

CREATING PLANET EARTH

by Rusty Keeler

Every generation of new ecologists addresses the need for playscapes to match the landscapes while engendering wonder and beauty into a child's everyday world. Keeler's playground style imitates nature with designs of innovative path finding, inventive structures, and "swarm builds" that make each play space entirely original.

What is the most important place on the planet for children? Is it the Amazon Rain Forest? The Pacific Ocean? The Himalayan Mountains? How majestic! As adults we may think of lofty places of great natural importance, and yet the most important place on the planet for young children is . . . your back yard. That's right. The place that children visit every day is actually the most important place in the world. It is the place where children use their senses to explore the planet and experience the wonders of nature.

What do your children experience when they step outside? Are they able to touch dirt? Smell flowers? Find worms? Plant seeds? Climb trees? Hug chickens? All children deserve to squish mud and splash in puddles. All children need to smile at the sun and feel its warmth smiling back. Every child should be able to roll down hills and hide in tall grass. All children deserve to have their sense of wonder sparked by the possibilities of the planet.



Courtesy of Rusty Keeler, www.earthplay.net



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But doesn't it take an extensive nature center or national park for children to make friends with the planet? No! All it takes is someone like you to decide to bring nature into your yard and allow children to explore. Plant bulbs that pop into flowers in spring. Bring dirt, sand, and water into your yard. Plant shade trees and fruit trees and trees that burst into fragrant bloom. Plant pumpkin seeds. Allow corners of your yard to grow wild. Hang birdhouses and bird feeders. Bring children outside to study nature first-hand. Add magnifying glasses and shovels to your outdoor loose parts collection.

Today people all over the world are making beautiful changes to their yards by creating opportunities

like these for children to play and explore in the natural world. School communities everywhere are working together to green their yards, create outdoor classrooms, and build natural playgrounds. You can too. Form a small committee, dream your yard, assess and tap your local community resources, and plan a volunteer community "swarm build." With the help of family and friends (and folks with a backhoe or two!) you can transform your space into a beautiful, inviting space for children's play, learning, exploration, and creativity. As you beautify your school yard you are beautifying the world and beautifying children's introductions to the planet.

Dream Big. Start Small. Never Stop.

*Rusty Keeler is an artist and designer who works with communities and schools around the world to design and build natural play and learning spaces for children. He is the author of the book *Natural Playscapes* (Exchange Press, 2008). Rusty lives among the hills and gorges outside Ithaca, NY. Visit www.earthplay.net for more information.*

